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ABSTRACT

During the past three years, Santa Fe Community College (Florida) has designed and implemented an experimental competency-based program in human services training with a specialization in substance abuse counseling that meets the needs of atypical adult students and also the accountability demands of the academic community. Both a residential component and an external-degree component have been structured and carried out and criteria for evaluation of life experiences for academic credit have been established. The first program component involved recruiting 23 persons from substance abuse agencies, who were stipended and taught in experimental/didactic fashion. Another component of the program--a non-resident component--was based upon three premises: (1) taking into consideration the previous life experiences of the students; (2) not requiring them to leave their jobs to attend an educational institution; and (3) upgrading their level of competency. The model for instruction required that each student attend a three-hour seminar or learning laboratory in his community to work with a learning facilitator on demonstrating mastery in 48 specific helping skills or understandings. The 48 credits were human service and substance abuse credits toward an associate of science degree in human services. An additional 12 credits in general education were required. (MB)

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External Degrees, A Non-Traditional Approach For Credentialing Adult Human Service Workers

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ABSTRACT

In order to meet the increasing demand for mental health services many agencies are using uncredentialed adults with relevant life experiences in responsible paraprofessional roles. However, in order to respond to public concerns regarding the quality of mental health care many states are taking definite steps toward tightening credentialing guidelines. In this situation uncredentialed paraprofessional workers could be adversely affected by heavily academic credential requirements. This article describes a program currently in operation which attempts to provide academic credential-related credit for paraprofessional adult workers based on these premises: (1) taking into consideration their previous life experience; (2) not requiring them to leave their jobs to attend an educational institution; and (3) upgrading their level of competency.

External Degrees, A Non-Traditional Approach For
Credentialing Adult Human Service Workers

Community colleges are mandated to meet the needs of adults whose life commitments prevent them from reaching educational goals through the instructional models of traditional institutions of higher learning. One large group of such adults is indigenous human service workers hired by mental health agencies to work in alcohol or drug abuse programs because their own background and experience equip them to understand and be helpful to persons who are clients in such programs. Many such workers have no academic credentials and neither want nor could handle traditional training (SREB 1969). Lacking academic credentials, however, such workers have no means of horizontal or upward mobility in the work hierarchy of the mental health agency.

At the present time many concerns are being voiced regarding the quality of the care being provided through mental health agencies. This concern has led to a nation-wide focus on credentialing as one means of quality control. Credentialing procedures, however, as they are presently being structured are based primarily on academic criteria (Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, 1978). Such procedures will militate against the indigenous paraprofessional worker who has skills but lacks the understandings that will be needed to meet such academically oriented credentialing procedures.

Faced with this situation the challenge confronting concerned educators is to design an academically sound non-traditional training program that would designate skills and understandings that can be given academic credit and criteria for competence that can be used to evaluate such skills and understandings. Such a program must fit the needs of adult human service workers who cannot leave their jobs or their communities to attend regularly scheduled classes, who may not be "academically inclined," who are functioning well in difficult work situations and who need academic credentials to maintain themselves as well as to advance in their agencies.

ONE ANSWER TO THE CHALLENGE

In the past three years, Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida, has designed and implemented an experimental competency-based program in human services training with a specialization in substance abuse counseling that meets the needs of atypical adult students and also the accountability demands of the academic community. Both a residential component and an external-degree component have been structured and carried out and criteria for evaluation of life experience for academic credit have been established (Duncan et al 1978). The program was funded by the Florida Drug Abuse Education and Prevention Trust, Tallahassee, Florida and the Career Development Center, Washington, D.C.

The first program component involved bringing to Gainesville twenty-three persons recruited from substance abuse agencies throughout the State of Florida for the academic years 1974-76. These persons were stipended and were taught in experiential/didactic fashion. The results in learning of students were positive; however, they were not typical non-certificated substance abuse personnel. They were younger, more mobile, less settled in

their commitments and personal goals; they were free to remove themselves for more than one year to attend college away from their communities. Many did not return to the jobs they left. Agencies expressed a need for training their personnel who were in direct community-related service in a program that would upgrade skills and give credentials but would not require workers to leave the agency and the community. A non-resident component of the training program seemed to be the answer.

Thus, in 1976 twenty-six students were recruited, each of whom was working full-time in a human service agency in one of the six following cities in North Florida: St. Petersburg, Tampa, Orlando, Cocoa, Jacksonville, and Gainesville. They were not typical college students. They were older, had family responsibilities, had not had parental support to finance their education, had held jobs for a long time and over half of them were heads of households.

For this program the objectives used in the traditional resident mental health worker training program were rewritten into 48 learning packets covering 48 specific helping skills or understandings. These targeted skills were written as competencies, mastery of which was evaluated using objective criteria with required levels of mastery spelled out. Each packet included basic instructional materials for students who might need study or practice. However, each packet was written in a manner that allowed a student to take the evaluation instrument without study if he wished. The option, then, was that students could be given credit for their life experience and for their on-the-job learnings if they could behaviorally show mastery of the skill areas as enunciated by the instructional packets.

The 48 credits were human service and substance abuse credits toward an A.S. degree in human services at Santa Fe Community College. Each student needed an additional 12 credits in general education and was encouraged to take these courses at their local community college, with whom an articulation agreement had been reached to allow the Santa Fe external degree program to exist in their communities.

THE EXTERNAL INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

The model for instruction required that each student attend a three-hour weekly seminar or learning laboratory in his community to work with a learning facilitator on any questions about the materials or the target skills. That facilitator was a local educator/trainer recruited as a consultant to the Santa Fe program. The evaluation of mastery, however, was handled by a Santa Fe Community College staff member who spent one entire day a month at each site for these additional purposes: instruction or training in skills when needed, interpretation of criteria or terminology, and general morale boosting and support for all of the persons involved in the program. The Santa Fe Community College staff member was also the liason with the students' employers for interpretations of the program and negotiation in problem areas that arose. This articulation with employers was found to be as important in the functioning of the program as the teaching and evaluating of the students.

Workshops in Gainesville were held at the beginning of each semester to familiarize the facilitators with learning packets, teaching approaches and evaluation procedures. These facilitators were the primary student contact in the program. Four Santa Fe Community College staff members

were selected to work with the non-residential program. Their task was to develop and implement the program and function as evaluators, act as resources for the facilitators, each working with the same selected site(s) throughout the program. Each was active simultaneously in the residential training program.

Instruction in the external degree program tended to follow a more didactic model with some experiential practice sessions included for particular target skills. The students did in fact have many skills at the outset; however, they tended to need confidence and clarity as to the counseling process and to want practice and instruction in order to feel that they had mastered the skills.

The flexibility of Santa Fe Community College administration was a significant contribution to the success of the program. The registrar at Santa Fe Community College allowed great flexibility in meeting deadlines and in handling the individual student situations that arose. Students registered for the same courses as outlined in the resident program. For each two or three hours of credit, mastery of two or three skills was demonstrated. Credits were given as the student completed the work, with the work being done on an individualized basis. Thus, students often had incomplete courses at the regular semester intervals. They were given grades when they demonstrated mastery of skills denoted as required for each course.

The financial aid administrators in conjunction with the business office were also helpful in a number of ways. They granted tuition payment deferments when fee payment could not be made on time. They allowed students to handle business matters via the program secretary, as well as allowing them

to pay tuition by mail.

RESULTS

The program was successful. Fourteen of the students completed the program in one year; the rest in one year plus one semester. Four students dropped out of the program due to losing their jobs. This rate of attrition was considerably lower than that in the traditional residential program.

The usefulness of the program was validated by all students, by instructors and by employers. Agency staff who supervised the students report behavioral changes in their employees including more facilitative interaction with clients, higher level of motivation, responsibility and productivity in the agency, more professional behavior, increased self confidence, more sophisticated theoretical knowledge, and expressions of motivation to pursue higher education. Instructors (including learning facilitators) agree that, in spite of many difficulties inherent in pioneering the external degree program, the results in personal learning and in instructional stance have made the experience worthwhile.

In a survey given to the students, eighteen of the nineteen that completed the program felt that they would never have completed an A.S. degree in a traditional program. Over half of them also felt that this program had allowed them to build the self confidence and skills necessary to complete their education in a traditional institution, although an overwhelming majority preferred the external approach and wanted to continue their education in a similar program.

It therefore seems clear that Santa Fe Community College has served adult students that had not previously been served by traditional educational approaches, has changed attitudes toward education in a more positive direction, and has made a significant contribution to the level of mental health care delivery in the agencies in which these human service personnel are at work.

Santa Fe Community College continued the external degree offering to human service workers employed full-time in the geographical area it serves. The same teaching and evaluation methods and overall program structure will be followed as in the model for substance abuse personnel. The program is financed through students' tuition fees and staffed as before by selected members of the residential training staff.

The competencies developed by the staff of the college and used in this program have been selected by the State of Florida as the primary document from which credentialing guidelines for substance abuse workers in the State of Florida will be developed (DATE Association, 1978). A task force has been formed with a mandate to review and revise these competencies. This act of recognition from leaders in substance abuse prevention in the State of Florida serves to validate the training materials presented in this paper. It also opens the way to new possibilities of leadership position for community colleges in the areas of credentialing and adult education.

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